The Fourth Church Pulpit

AND IT WAS GOOD

June 13, 1993

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: John 1:1-5, 14 , Genesis 1:24-31

"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. . . ."
Genesis 1:31 (NRSV)

Think about the simple improbability of our being here. Science knows the unlikeness of human existence: scientists know that if the expansion of that incredibly dense fireball over a period of 750,000 years had been one millionth of a second slower, the universe would have collapsed. If it had been one millionth of a second faster, no planets would have formed. If the nuclear blast of the big bang had been slightly weaker, there would have been hydrogen only in the atmosphere. Had it been slightly stronger it would have produced only helium.

We are here because of the most incredible confluence of unrelated and seemingly random events. It's like the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a print shop, Einstein quipped, as a way of suggesting that it isn't random at all. [See Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality,* p. 28, Elizabeth Achtemaier, *God, Nature & Pulpit,* p. 21]

It is the elemental philosophic question. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why am I here? Why are you here? Does it matter that we are here? Is there purpose and meaning to our being or was Macbeth right?. . .

> "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more; it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing."

The same dilemma, put less eloquently but no less urgently, one time:

Charlie Brown is complaining about everything that is going wrong, lamenting the sadness and tragedy of his life and finally blurts out, "I wish I had never been born!" — to which, Lucy, the existential philosopher responds, "Why, the theological implications of that are staggering."

The philosophers, the artists and poets and religious mystics have been wrestling with it for as long as human beings have been able to step back from the immediacies of physical necessity and think, "Why is there something? Why not nothing?"

Annie Dillard observed,

> "The question from agnosticism is, 'Who turned on the lights?' The question from faith is 'Whatever for?'" [*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* p. 41]

It's fascinating that theological support comes today from the scientific community. Stephen Hawking, the brilliant astrophysicist who wrote *A Brief History of Time,* describes the moment of the "Big Bang" in highly technical mathematical terms and concludes:

> "It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us." [p. 127]

And professor of mathematical physics, Paul Davies, in his highly acclaimed book, *The Mind of God,* agrees. Science, he says, suggests something other than random coincidences as the organizing principle in creation.

So there is an elementary theological choice we each make. It doesn't matter whether we bring to that choice years of academic struggle or simply our basic human self-consciousness. Each of us chooses to have faith — beyond our ability to prove or to know — that there is meaning and purpose, or there is no meaning and purpose: creation reflects the will of a creator or creation is a coincidence, a cosmic accident: there is a God or there is no God.

The story of the creation, found in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, makes a breath-taking assertion. "In the beginning . . . God." There is no philosophic argument for the existence of a supreme being, a first cause: this is not history, physics, biology . . . simply the bold affirmation — "In the beginning . . . God," and then a wonderful story of creation . . . formed out of chaos, darkness and light, sea and dry land, lush vegetation, fruit, stars, creatures to swim in the water and crawl on the dry land, birds and cattle and finally human beings — in God's own image, blessed and given responsibility.

In the process of telling this story, this bold theological affirmation, the ancient writer says something intriguing, repeats it six times, in fact. "And God saw that it was good." Six times, God sees light and calls it good; sees dry land and all the fruit trees and calls it good: steps back and looks at the cattle and all the wild animals, the gorillas and snow leopards and calls it good. And finally, after humankind is fashioned — male and female — God takes a look at the whole project — looks at it all "and indeed, it was very good."

What's that about, that six-fold repetition of goodness ending in a superlative flourish — "indeed it was very good"? You'd think the writer was worried that his readers might not get it, might come to the opposite conclusion — that it isn't so good.

Now let's roll up our sleeves for a moment and be thorough students and remember the context. Genesis 1 was not written to answer a scientific curiosity: it is not an answer to the question "How did we get here?" or even "Why is there a me?" Rather it is a response to a far more urgent, and not at all abstract, problem. "How are we going to get out of the mess we are in? Is there reason to hope for the future? Will we survive?" The people of God are in exile in Babylon. That's the mess, the compelling situation. It looks like the end of the line. Their culture, customs, laws are being overwhelmed by the powerfully dominant culture of Babylon. Even their religion seems weak, powerless, impotent to save or even help them. Their predicament leads them to conclude that there is no hope. Maybe there is no God after all, or if there is, maybe it doesn't matter.

Those are the real dilemmas, which are not so very different from questions we ask — to which the ancient writes addresses his two bold affirmations.

"In the beginning . . . God" and "it was — is good, indeed, very good."

The simple fact is that religion has not always seemed to believe that creation is good. In fact the religion of Babylon taught that there were two gods and the physical world was produced by the lesser and inferior of the two. In his commentary on this text, Walter Brueggemann observes:

> ". . . a tendency in some theological traditions to articulate a deep gulf between the goodness of God and the unhealthiness of the world." [*Interpretations,* Vol. I, p. 36]

It's an unfortunate legacy with a lot of us. Sometimes our world view seems more Babylonian than Hebrew. We were taught, were we not, that "worldly" is a pejorative, negative word? Some of us were taught a little song . . . "Be careful little hands what you do. Be careful little eyes what you see. Be careful little ears what you hear," as if exposure to the world, without the filter of religion, would do irreparable damage.

And, of course, what is more earthy, worldly . . . than sex? It seems that sex is all we talk about in church these days and part of the reason, I suppose, is the long standing discomfort with and distrust of human sexuality by the church. For centuries, church conversation about human sexuality has been limited to three words, "don't do it" or "if you do it, try not to enjoy it too much." And in spite of the progress we think we have made in recent decades, youngsters still grow up thinking that sex is dirty, bad, unhealthy, and feeling guilty about the whole business.

And, as a nation, we end up with far more unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, therefore, far more abortions than any of the other Western nations; not because our teenagers are more active sexually. They just don't use contraception. And why? Part of the reason is we have traditionally made it very difficult to have access to effective contraception. We believe, it seems, that if we're too open and honest about it, if we make birth control easily accessible, who knows what will happen? What happens, in the absence of access to birth control, is unwanted pregnancy and abortion, creating one of the great inconsistencies of all time — the most vociferous opponents of abortion also oppose access to birth control, thus increasing the need and demand for abortion. So, in the meantime we subject our children to an unremitting, unceasing uninterrupted barrage of eroticism in advertising — Calvin Klein is determined to push the limit each week — on television, in movies; and when they do what the culture tells them is fashionable and okay to do, and what their hormones need no encouragement to do, we make it as difficult as possible for them to prevent conception.

Genesis 1 proclaims the goodness of creation — goodness here meaning delightful, lovely. Genesis 1 proclaims that the goodness of the creation tells something important about the creator: and by implication, that if you don't know and understand and experience something of creation's goodness, you are missing something very important. Of course, there is an ethic. Of course, human sexuality is a gift given to be enjoyed responsibly, morally. Of course, it is for a healthy and moral purpose, not to be demeaned by irresponsible promiscuity — or by turning others into objects of gratification. But, says Old Testament scholar, Samuel Terrien, religion concentrates so hard on the ethical restrictions it overlooks the aesthetic delight, the loveliness and beauty.

And so, in our day, we have seen a reappearance of something called "creation spirituality" — an attempt to recover our own ancient tradition of appreciating the natural order and seeing it as good, healthy, a way of receiving and being healed and saved by God's love.

It is a notion shared with other religious traditions: Native American, for instance, African, Celtic. It is no less Christian because it is part of other traditions as well: reverence before creation, grateful humility before the Creator.

There have been times in our own history when it flourished. For instance, the 12th century which produced a number of mystic theologians who experienced God fully in the natural world: Julian of Norwich, for instance and most famous of all, Francis of Assisi.

We need to rescue St. Francis from "birdbath sentimentality" says theologian Matthew Fox, and recognize him for the radical and important theologian he was.

> "Be praised, then, my Lord God
> In and through your creatures."

He wrote and we echoed in our opening hymn:

> "Through noble brother sun
> Through sister moon
> In brother wind be praised, my Lord
> And in the air . . .
> Be praised, my Lord, through sister water
> And brother fire
> Through our dear mother earth."

The church, even in the 12th century, was wary of people who thought like that. St. Francis and Dame Julian existed on the margins of the church. Why? Because the Christian Church in the Middle Ages had forgotten the Genesis 1 affirmation of goodness. The most brilliant thinker the church produced in its first 1,000 years was Augustine, and in the midst of some terribly important and good things, Augustine also taught that the creation and the human body were suspect, soiled, fallen . . . "the body and soul are at war" he said,

and he used his own rowdy youth as illustration. But the Middle Ages Christian theology believed God wants us to withdraw from the world. And before long the church's official discomfort with the world was inspiring it to equate celibacy with holiness, sexuality with sinfulness — and to close the door on inquiry into nature. "God is known in the crucifixion of Jesus: the world of nature is a distraction," was the rationale. And so around 1600 scientists and mystics who looked for God in nature began to be excommunicated, sometimes executed: Dominican scientist Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 and Galileo condemned in 1616.

Matthew Fox argues that this gulf of hostility between religion and science began there and has its roots in Christianity's traditional discomfort with creation.

So Fox proposes a new way of being Christian — which he calls *Creation Spirituality.* "Fall in love with the creation," at least three times a day, he urges. Fall in love with a flower, an animal, a species of bird. To know the goodness of the creation is to know something of the goodness of God. To know one's self as part of the creation, called into being by God's love, fashioned in God's image, is to know wholeness and healing and reconciliation.

Science, knowledge, understanding, doesn't dispute that. In fact, for me, the little I know and read and learn awakens spirituality.

In a bestseller, *A Natural History of the Senses,* Diane Ackerman, without ever talking about God, or religion, writes powerfully and eloquently about the miracle of bodies, our senses.

> "We need to return to feeling the textures of life" she advises. "Much of our experience in twentieth century America, is an effort to get away from textures, to fade into a stark, simple, solemn, puritanical, all-business routine that doesn't have anything so unseemly as sensual zest . . ." Ackerman relates how Helen Keller, who she calls one of the greatest "sensualists" of all time — blind, deaf and mute — enjoyed music by placing her hands on a radio, able to tell the difference between brass and strings, and "listened to colorful down-home stories of life surging along the Mississippi from the lips of her friend Mark Twain." [p. xviii]

And God saw that it was good, and God apparently wants us to know the goodness.

I have never found it possible to know there is water near without going to look at it and touch it.

I have never been able to resist walking on a beach, regardless of the weather.

I have never not wanted to go outside at night and look up, or to resist leaning down to breathe in the bouquet of a carnation or a rose.

And I never am able to do any of those without hearing the words . . . "And God saw that it was good."

Matthew Fox wrote:

> "Creation is the something new that happens when our first child is born: it is the resurrection experience when we bottom out from pain and despair and experience being alive. It is the peace that passes all understanding when a good person dies well." [p. 10, *Creation Spirituality.*]

The story was written to tell people that they mattered, were loved and had meaning; to stiffen the resolve, to comfort and encourage people who thought there was no hope . . . people who could not conceive of a future or themselves or for generations after them. And so when you and I find ourselves in similar situations: when life falls in, when death takes away someone more precious than life itself; when the test comes back and the news is bad; when we fail; when a life-long dream fades; when we are depressed or in grief, or afraid . . . we don't need scientific proof that there is a supreme being. We need a hand to hold. We need to know that there is purpose and meaning and therefore hope, for the whole project and therefore for us personally. We need to know not only "in the beginning . . . God . . ."; we need to know that what is — is good.

The preacher is aware that this sermon and the one preceding it — on the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis — have not mentioned the name Jesus. The story was written 600 years before his birth. He knew the story: it formed his attitude, his own spirituality. He obviously loved the world and was comfortable in it. He lived close to the world, walked daily on dusty roads and beside the sea; used its beauty as metaphor for God's love. "Consider the lilies," he said, as one who obviously had pondered the intricate beauty of a flower. "Consider the birds," he said, as one who had done just that. He was no withdrawn, other-worldly ascetic. He enjoyed eating and drinking and laughing with his friends so much that his enemies called him a glutton. And he touched people physically, touched people no one else dared touch.

But far more to the point, there is a human sense that the story of creation is about him. Because we believe something incredible about him. We believe that in him, in his life, God the creator lived and moved and had being. We believe that something of the creative energy of the one who was "in the beginning," who called life into being, who fashioned vegetation and animals and moon and stars — was in the person of Jesus who we know as Christ.

In him, we trust that the God who comforted and encouraged and sustained exiles 2,600 years ago, has come to be with us: to live our life and experience our humanity and to die our death.

We believe, in the words of the hauntingly beautiful hymn, that the "God of the sparrow. . . whale . . . swirling stars" is, in Jesus Christ, also the God of the hungry, sick and the prodigal . . . God of the lonely heart . . . God to whom we turn and to whom we will return. God, our beginning and our end. . . . God — our home.

"The Word was God. . . ."

"And the word became flesh. . . ."

"And . . . it was good."

Very good, indeed. Amen.